

Office Memorandum • UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

TO : Director of Training

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FROM : Chief, Assessment and Evaluation Staff

SUBJECT: Student Critiques

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1. A well balanced training evaluation program will provide information

- a. To the student, to aid him in learning.
- b. To the instructors, to help him in presenting his material.
- c. To training management so that it can know what is happening in the courses.
- d. To the supervisors to help in utilizing the student effectively.

2. Student critiques provide no assistance to the student or to the supervisor. They can provide a limited amount of information concerning how well the student likes the course, e.g., concerning consumer reaction to the material presented, the manner in which it was presented, and the administrative conditions surrounding its presentation.

3. Consumer acceptance of a course, while it cannot be ignored, is not the critical factor in what is presented, how it is presented, and under what conditions it is presented. The typical student is in no position to judge these matters. The real "critique" is whether the students change during the course in the direction of accomplishing the course objectives. Some authorities believe, for example, that the reason we now have a shortage of scientists is because too much attention has been paid to student's likes and dislikes and too little to what the student needs to know to compete in the modern world.

4. In OTR, student critiques have been all too often the sole source of information concerning what was happening in a course. Critiques undoubtedly served DTR as a very useful indication of consumer acceptance at a time when OTR was beginning its program. At such a time, this kind of information is of great importance. Once an office of training is firmly established, continued emphasis on student critiques has many disadvantages:

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a. They divert the attention of the instructors from the main point of student learning to the subsidiary one of student acceptance. This is a natural result of the threat posed by unfavorable critiques, particularly in the absence of any information on what the student has learned.

b. Unless systematically controlled and studied, critiques permit heavy bias in favor of the opinions of vociferous, excited, ax-grinding students, friends, "important" people, and "authorities."

c. They generate more effort than the information is worth.

5. The above paragraphs point to the need for a fuller understanding among instructors of OTR training evaluation policy which emphasizes the benefits to him rather than the benefits to the supervisor, as well as a statement concerning the role of student critiques in the process. A statement concerning these points should make mandatory the obtaining of systematic information about what students are learning, as well as the re-statement of policy on student critiques.

6. What is done with this information about student learning by way of reporting it to others can be a matter for consideration in each instance. With such a statement of policy, student critiques could be abolished except for use in carefully chosen instances.

7. One cannot but wonder about the capability of an instructor who resists evaluation for the basic purpose of improving his own teaching. Two points can be made:

a. Developing a good course is an exacting task. It is not easy to define objectives realistically, make instruction consistent with these objectives, organize instruction so that the objectives are achieved, and measure the extent to which they are achieved. Some instructors are unable or unwilling to do this kind of basic thinking. It is much easier to prepare specific lectures.

b. Should instructors be unable to think of ways to get information about how their students are changing, a legitimate question becomes: "Is the course teaching anything?"

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8. Abolishing critiques with no positive statement, while it may give a temporary boost to instructor morale, will, I fear, have the following effects:

a. Those instructors who understand the importance of course evaluation as a whole, as a basis for conducting good training, will continue some kind of critique procedure as part of a thorough evaluation effort.

b. Those instructors who don't understand this, particularly those who are uneasy about their courses, their abilities, will eliminate the critique along with any other management controls; and they will content themselves with mediocre instruction, justifying it in terms of the complexity, abstractness, or vagueness of the subject matter, or the importance of not offending, insulting, or challenging the students.



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